

# The 1881 Surname Atlas, Y-DNA, and Historical Research

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Software programs like the 'Surname Atlas' can be a major help in understanding the long term presence of a name but also migration patterns and the movements of families. But they may fail to identify significant movements and name changes which can rather be understood via Y-DNA and historical research. This article gives an example of how a distribution map based on 1881 Census data seemed to say that a connection was effectively impossible, whereas Y-DNA showed otherwise. Historical research then suggested a fascinating explanation. Unfortunately, this was then dashed by further research in historical records. There is still no definitive answer.

The background to this story is that a connection was asserted between the Scottish Ayrshire Bicket(t)/Becket(t) tree, and the Scottish Orkney Bichan tree (pronounced 'Bickan') during recent discussions within the Guild. The 1881 Surname Atlas data showed no overlap between the two surnames as shown in figures 1 and 2, which therefore did not support the idea of a connection.

The challenge was to explain this connection historically. Certainly the Surname Atlas gave no clues. Further research confirmed the extreme concentration of the Bichan surname in Orkney, until the 1900s.

The Ayrshire Bicket(t)/Becket(t) tree has no obvious overlap with Orkney in historical records. Indeed, there are no Bicket, Bickett, Becket, or Beckett births recorded in Orkney ever. There are no Bicket, Bickett, Becket, or Beckett census entries in Orkney from 1841 through 1921 except for a James B Bicket, a missionary minister recorded in 1891 and 1901 who was born in Kilmarnock, Ayrshire.

The Ayrshire Bicket(t)/Becket(t) tree does not do much better in terms of early records than the Orkney Bichans. There are various spellings of the surname starting in Ayrshire records in the 1600s, including the spellings Bicket, Bichet (mostly), Bichett, Bechet, Bichat, and Bighet. However, Big Y testing with Family Tree DNA has demonstrated the genetic relationships

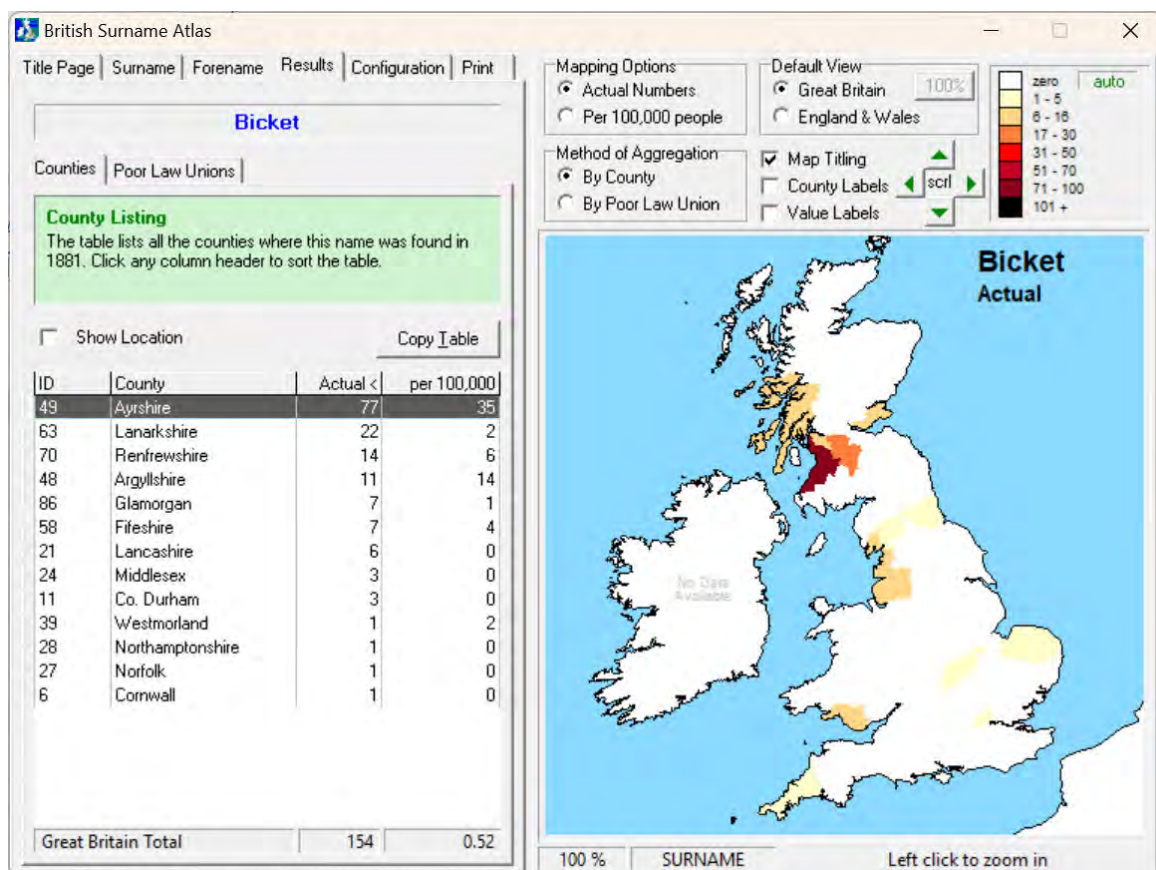


Figure 1. 1881 Bicket Distribution in British Surname Atlas.

However, Y-DNA showed that there was a genetic connection around 1200 with the shared SNP Y-13847. The Y-DNA connection was unexpected: a Bichan in New Zealand did the Y-111 STR test with Family Tree DNA and matched with most people in the Bicket(T)/Becket(T) DNA project. An upgrade to Big Y confirmed the point at which they were connected.

of 28 different currently extant branches of Bickets, Bicketts, Beckets, and Becketts, almost all of which can be traced back to Ayrshire or to the north of Ireland. 22 of these branches descended from a single individual who was born sometime around 1400, which we also consider the time when surnames were established for commoner people in that area, because

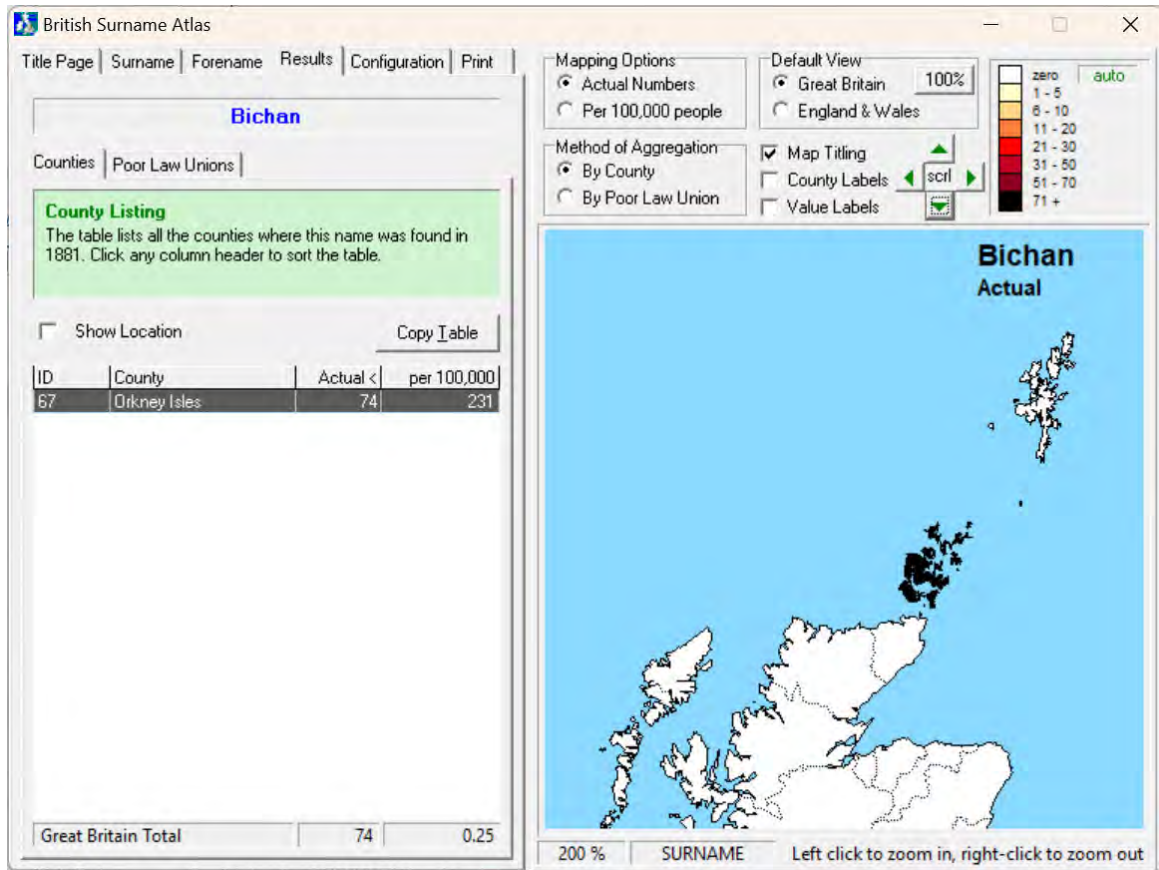


Figure 2. 1881 Bichan Distribution in British Surname Atlas.

there are other genetically linked lineages starting at that same time for a number of other surnames. All 28 branches of the tree, including the Bichan branch, descend from someone who was born three SNP mutations earlier.

Historical research suggested an intriguing explanation for the Bichan surname appearing in Orkney. In the 1600s Ayrshire was a hotbed of Covenanter activity - believers in the independence of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland from the Crown. But their rebellion was ultimately crushed, ending in nearly 1200 Covenanters being captured at the Battle of Bothwell Bridge on 22 June 1679. Most were subsequently released, but the worst offenders were to be transported to America as slaves. However, the ship they were being transported in, the 'Crown of London', sank off Deerness in Orkney on 10 December 1679. Those who died included two Bitchets from Fenwick in Ayrshire. Not all of the prisoners died. Most who survived were recaptured, but some evaded capture, and some were reported to have settled in Orkney. There is no record for the names of some of the prisoners on board, so it seemed quite probable that one of these unrecorded prisoners who escaped was a Bicket/Bitchet, without any papers, and that he started the Bichan dynasty.

Doing further research for this article has unfortunately disproven this rather romantic explanation. It all has to do with variant/deviant surname spellings. The earliest Bichan record in ScotlandsPeople is for a birth in Kirkwall, Orkney in 1687, to Magnus Bichan and Helen Corrigill. This was eight years after the 1679 sinking of the 'Crown of London', so it was a perfect fit for Magnus being an escaped prisoner from that shipwreck. However, we have now found that there are earlier records for Bichens in Orkney (with 'E' rather than 'A'), and it is clear these were the same family, with Magnus Bichen/Bichan and Helen Corrigill having six recorded children between 1678 through 1695. Their first child was born before the shipwreck happened, so Magnus could not have been brought to Orkney for the first

time on that ship. There are also six other Bichen marriages in Orkney before the date of the shipwreck.

The bottom line is that Y-DNA has demonstrated that a definite genetic link exists between the Ayrshire Bicket(t)/Becket(t) tree and the Orkney Bichan tree, but we do not yet have an explanation in historical records for how this link came to be. We can say that the Bichan tree was definitely not started by a Covenanter prisoner who survived the shipwreck off Deerness in Orkney in 1679.



Figure 3. Orkney Covenanters Memorial from orkney.com.

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David's Guild hosted website can be found at [bicket.one-name.net](http://bicket.one-name.net) and his DNA project website at [www.familytreedna.com/groups/bicket](http://www.familytreedna.com/groups/bicket).